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# Aleister Crowley

## The Great Beast of Modernity



We place no reliance  
On virgin or pigeon;  
Our Method is Science,  
Our Aim is Religion

- Aleister Crowley, Equinox

## Introduction

Western mystical and occult traditions, after having been underground for some three hundred years, reemerged in the late Victorian age as partly rational, partly spiritual alternatives to religion and materialist science. Three hundred years earlier, when occultism and science – or natural philosophy, as it was then called – were linked rather than separate, the enthusiasm of the Inquisition had forced the occult underground. For all intents and purposes, the subsequent death of religion left the mechanistic worldview of mainstream science isolated, and skeptical, if not dismissive, of the occult, its introspective and 'metaphysical'\* counterpart. Ironically, since its resurfacing in the age of modernity, science and skepticism have served not only as an opponent but as a 'spiritual' tool in the development of occultism.

The initial revival of occult science, in its popular expression, took place around the fin de siècle of the late 19th to the early 20th century. Aleister Crowley, also known as “The Great Beast 666” (To Mega Therion in Greek), seems to be one of the most lasting influences from the first wave. His wealth, elitism and influential personality enabled him to test the cultural boundaries of his era in many parts of the world, gaining both fame and infamy wherever he went. In a 2002 BBC poll for The Greatest Briton, Crowley was voted 73rd out of a hundred, between King Henry V and Robert Bruce.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the London Times in 1969 cited Crowley as “one of the 1000 Makers of the Twentieth Century.”<sup>2</sup> As an occultist and magician, Crowley furiously attacked religious dogmatism and instead employed the scientific method<sup>3</sup> as a tool for exploration of the Self – albeit in a different formulation than that of a Freud or a Krafft-Ebing. Unlike psychology and psychoanalysis, Crowley's model of consciousness extended past the material, the quantifiable, and the unconscious to include the concept of the 'divine.' Combining empirical analysis with Eastern yoga, Tantric sex, and magic, his aim was to create a modern scientific method of understanding – and being 'spiritually' attuned to – the Self, offering knowledge of both the physical and so-called metaphysical aspects of identity.

The rationalism spread by the Enlightenment, aside from its struggles with religion, had called virtually all beliefs into question; however, rather like a dogmatic religion, it often seemed incapable of questioning itself and was steadily building a pantheon of scientific theories. Crowley, an artist and a poet, seemed to be anything but restricted by his rational compulsions and religious beliefs. He applied and questioned both, following an explorative path that confronted many taboos to become an inspirer of individualism and self-improvement. Science, like religion, created a structured language that was appropriated by other forms of knowledge, and Crowley used it to create his own eclectic magical lexicon. The aim was, more ambitiously than Freud, to allow the “occult” or “hidden” world of the irrational mind to be observed and explored objectively by the individual himself.

Dogma's, taboos and morals were swept away in the face of Crowley's exploration of consciousness. The engagement with self-consciousness, of which Crowley was an important agent, has been called the “central insight” of modernity by historian Alex Owen;<sup>4</sup> if so, Crowley counts as both an important product and producer of the modern identity. Crowley, as an occult scientist, or magician, took the lessons and language of (Freudian) psychology and combined them with mystical techniques for exploring and mastering the unconscious on an individual level. This was a much less widespread,

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\* Author's Note: Single quotes indicate the most ambiguous terms; their presence is implied in repeated iterations of the same term.

1 DuQuette, p.xv

2 Sutin, p.421

3 E.g. experimentation, observation, measurable evidence, analysis, repeatability

4 Owen, p.120

but more radically modern approach to the mind than mainstream science.

### Magic and Science in the 20th Century

The scientific nature of magic lies in its resort to specific methodologies – executed with “great art and scientific precision”<sup>5</sup> – which produce predictable and specified results.<sup>6</sup> Resulting magical phenomena are, as Sutin writes, “as real – or questionable – as any other phenomena. That is, their 'reality' depends on sense perceptions acting upon our brain,” and are thus empirically analyzable.<sup>7</sup> As Hymenaeus Beta, the current head of Crowley's order, writes in a foreword to a Crowleyn manual, “What is true of science holds true for scientific illuminism. Some findings may be replicated by future experimenters, others are subjective personal interpretation.”<sup>8</sup> This aspect of magic developed alongside modern sciences such as psychology and physics, and to historians like O'Keefe, the sciences appeared “increasingly willing to create occult sciences and give them official blessing.”<sup>9</sup>

Crowley's occult magic, alternately known as Scientific Illuminism, Thelema, or Magick, seems to have been a rational system of metaphors and rituals for self-understanding and self-improvement, based on disciplined observation of a variety of experiments on consciousness. These experiments were conducted in the same basic attitude and approach of science, to observe and analyze objectively what in effect is subjective; the experience of one's own 'mind,' 'consciousness,' or 'Self.' Like science, his Magick involved disciplined self-correction: like yoga, where certain postures and mental techniques can empty the mind, it was aimed at the detachment from conditioned and mechanical thoughts. Beyond self-control, Magick stressed the agency of the individual in creating their own state of mind.

While popular reports<sup>10</sup> of Crowley's magical rituals, with rumors of demonic incantations and lingering spirits, present a controversial image, his own account of magic seems rather sober and direct. In *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1929), Crowley wrote: “What is a Magical Operation? It may be defined as any event in nature which is brought to pass by Will. We must not exclude potato-growing or banking from our definition. Let us take a very simple example of a Magical Act: that of a man blowing his nose.”<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere he wrote that “It is theoretically possible to cause in any object any change of which that object is capable by nature.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in Magick, the Will – which may be anything rational or irrational, both or neither – is guided scientifically to change one's psychological and physical being. By this definition of magic, as Lon Milo DuQuette reflects, “We are all Magicians and we are either competent or incompetent practitioners of our craft.” Anything done through habitual or reactive behavior is unmagical, and anything willed is magical.<sup>13</sup>

Postmodern scholarly discussions on the nature of re-enchantment, re-sacralization and the like are thus the study of the changing focus of modern man's consciousness. In studying men like Crowley, we find those who used empirical science to develop a systematic focus on magical, enchanted, or willed behavior to gain agency in their own world. This may prove to have been a crucial step in the development of today's self-help and self-improvement psychology; and, as Sutin writes, “Crowley is

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5 DuQuette, p.191

6 Owen, p.239

7 Sutin, p.14

8 Hymenaeus Beta, Frater Superior of the OTO, *quoted in* DuQuette, p.ix

9 O'Keefe, p.527

10 See documentaries such as *Aleister Crowley: The Other Loch Ness Monster*

11 Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, p.106

12 Crowley, *Book Four*, p.127

13 DuQuette, p.11

most emphatically a part of the spiritual history” of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, he goes so far as to say that he “may be regarded as the primary fount of that diverse, fertile, and occasionally ridiculous range of movements loosely termed 'New Age.'”<sup>15</sup>

The magic of the Golden Dawn, Crowley's first occult order, was described by contemporary mystic Evelyn Underhill as a rationalizing tool of spirituality. “In magic,” she wrote, “the will unites with the intellect in an impassioned desire for super-sensible knowledge. This is the intellectual, aggressive, and scientific temperament trying to extend its field of consciousness, until it includes the super-sensible world: obviously the antithesis of mysticism.”<sup>16</sup> From the 'mainstream' mystical perspective then, occult magic extended the rationalistic and controlling drive of science into the realm of the mind and spirit. Magic attempted to make the 'supernatural' natural, as it held the supernatural to be an accessible state of consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

This sacrilegious aspect of Crowleyan magic – making the supernatural natural – can be seen as a deconstruction and appropriation of the much older religious practice of making the natural supernatural. Take for instance the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation: in the Eucharist, “one of the simplest and most complete Magick ceremonies”<sup>18</sup> according to DuQuette, natural things are transmuted into supernatural things and then consumed. Crowley went even further with his sacrilege: instead of the individual receiving the supernatural goods by the grace of authority, the magician can create them by him or herself. Thus, as Sutin notes, the magician issues the most powerful challenge of all to organized religion (and to science, and belief in general I might add) – the challenge of “equality of knowledge of, and access to, the divine realm.”<sup>19</sup>

## **Magic and Society**

According to Daniel O'Keefe, in his extensive social history of magic, *Stolen Lightning*, Western scientific cultures are the only ones to deny the reality of magic. His self-professed positivist study considers magic, armed with the tools of science, part of the backlash against the mechanical scientism that had been extended to society and Self since the Enlightenment.<sup>20</sup>

Reviewing numerous theories of modernists such as Freud, Mauss, Durkheim, and Weber, O'Keefe explains the roles of magic and the magician in modern society. Several 'facts' are established, such as the reality of the institutions of magic, their potential for engineering spontaneity in society, and their hostility to religion. Moreover, he finds that individual magic action is social action, often for power, prestige or authority,<sup>21</sup> and it allows marginalized individuals to project their will into their environment. Where in Freud's terms religion is the 'projection of the social,' O'Keefe finds that magic is a defensive projection of the ego. Magic, he writes, has served as “the midwife of the Self and as a co-founder of the individualist,”<sup>22</sup> and could serve as a viable religious projection of the individualistic postmodern society.

Magic occurs on a social level and can lead to mass psychological reactions. The end of a

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14 Sutin, p.3

15 Sutin, p.5

16 Underhill, p.71

17 Owen, p.147

18 DuQuette, p.221

19 Sutin, p.9

20 O'Keefe, pp.xv-xvii

21 O'Keefe, p.26

22 *Ibid.*, p.15

millennium, for instance – a willed, man-made conceptualization of time – brings about fears for the end-times. This common practice of willfully, or consciously self-imposing reactions and beliefs, was systematized for the individual by magicians such as Aleister Crowley.

Confronting the standard social ideas about reality, the magician self-programs new mindsets for sense perception through the invocation and evocation of specific deities or entities. These metaphorical spirits, when properly controlled, lend their powers for the benefit of the magician. However, the only real changes magicians can effect are in themselves.<sup>23</sup> Using magic as a science of rapid brain change, the magician works him or herself up to the point of believing something new, such as their link to a deity or a desired formula for self-change. To trigger a new belief, it seems that magic cannot be doubted as real. This trans-rational mindset blurs the social certainties and fixed lines of reality, so that a creative partnership – between intuition and reason, imagination and logic, irrational and rational – is required to sustain one's sense of Self.<sup>24</sup> Sticking to either side of the science-religion duality had its shortcomings, so in *Book 4* Crowley rejected both Faith and Reason as ultimate answers to reality and self-definition – Faith because it could be in the wrong god, and Reason because it cannot get beyond the permutations and combinations of its own axioms. Instead, the chosen method was thus to Experiment in physical and psychological techniques of consciousness change, and to see what happens.<sup>25</sup>

The techniques magicians used, what O'Keefe calls “psychological technologies” such as meditation or yoga, were gathered from the network of global cultures made available in the colonial era.<sup>26</sup> Many of the experimental techniques were functionally identical to self-conditioning, auto-suggestion, and hypnosis in psychotherapy. Astral Travel for instance relied on the imagination to form images in the mind, believing oneself to be in a place and traveling there mentally to observe and interact. Images, metaphors and numbers were employed to affect consciousness; and while largely psychological in aim, Magick often used physiological experiments – rituals, sometimes with the help of drugs or sex – to jolt the nervous system into altered functioning.

Madame Blavatsky and Anna Kingsford, two major figures in the fin-de-siècle mystic-occult movement, considered magical orders such as the Golden Dawn to lack occult qualities. In the words of Kingsford, the magical Adept “is at best a religious scientist.”<sup>27</sup> Crowley is not likely to have been affected by such criticism: as he states in *Magick in Theory and Practice*, he shunned the terms Theosophy, Spiritualism, Occultism, and Mysticism, instead choosing the name Magick – ‘the Science of the Magi.’ It seems then that Crowley would have relish the judgment of Kingsford and other occultists.

Crowley's definition of Magick stated that it is “the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will,”<sup>28</sup> and elsewhere that it is “the Science of understanding oneself and one's conditions.”<sup>29</sup> With this broad definition, we can conclude that Crowley was appropriating science to psychologize, and occultism to spiritualize. His innovation was the belief that magic itself is in the mind; thus Crowley could psychologize religious metaphors, writing that “The Gods are but names for

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23 DuQuette, p.191

24 Owen, p.239

25 Crowley, *Book 4*, Op. Cit.

26 O'Keefe, p.470

27 Owen, p.46-7

28 Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, p.11

29 *Ibid.*, p.19

the forces of nature themselves.”<sup>30</sup> Both metaphorical systems of science and religion suited his magic, but by occupying a niche between the two institutions, he seems to have been eschewed by the leaders of both.

### **Crowley's Formative Years**

Aleister Crowley was born in England in 1875, the same year that Madame Helena Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society. His parents were members of the Plymouth Brethren, a conservative variety of Protestantism. Crowley's family had become wealthy through its brewery, and his father had a fair amount of time to take Aleister around the countryside to preach about hellfire and the dangers of sin. Crowley was unquestioningly dedicated to his father's strict teachings, but, after a major transformation in his teens, turned against everything religious. Indeed, Lawrence Sutin, a recent biographer, contends that antagonism toward the established religious powers became the essence of Crowley's life and mission.<sup>31</sup> And, as his earlier biographer John Symonds points out,<sup>32</sup> the small, chosen sect which he grew up in helped to inspire his hatred for religious authority – and yet it also presents a clear parallel to the select magical orders he later created.

Crowley's experimental (and aggressive) nature is well illustrated by an anecdote from his youth. At the age of nine, Aleister learned of the common expression which says cats have nine lives. “I caught a cat,” he later reminisced, “and having administered a large dose of arsenic, I chloroformed it, hanged it above the gas jet, stabbed it, cuts its throat, smashed its skull, and, when it had been pretty thoroughly burnt, drowned it and threw it out of the window that the fall might remove the ninth life. The operation was successful. I was genuinely sorry for the animal; I simply forced myself to carry out the experiment in the interests of pure science.”<sup>33</sup> It seems Crowley, from an early age, was not afraid to pursue knowledge for himself. When he was twelve, after the unexpected death of his father, he rebelled and turned against everything he had been taught. His mother soon looked upon him as the devil incarnate. Ironically, Crowley would gladly associate with this archetype for the rest of his life; he claimed that “Blasphemy is the most pleasing of all acts to God.” Nevertheless, in his own view, he remained “a man of purity wearing a mask of vileness.”<sup>34</sup>

Born Edward Alexander, Crowley changed his name to the more lyrical Aleister to suit his growing desire for fame.<sup>35</sup> By his early twenties, Crowley was exploring his personal boundaries in the realms of sexual deviancy (by Victorian standards) as well as poetry, mountain climbing and especially the occult. Religious doubt (and the inability to remain in doubt), together with affluence, a thirst for power, exposure to global cultures, and experimentation with mind-altering substances had led him to have a life-changing mystical experience. He himself describes it ambiguously: “I was in the death struggle with Self: God and Satan fought for my soul those three long hours. God conquered – now I have only one doubt left – which of the twain was God?”<sup>36</sup>

Christian doctrines had divorced nature and spirit for centuries,<sup>37</sup> and science since the Enlightenment seemed to strive towards ridding itself of the latter; however, in the aftermath of his mystical experience, Crowley sought to revisit the spirit through science itself. The ambiguity of his

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30 Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, p.119

31 Sutin, p.2

32 Symonds, p.16

33 *Ibid.*, p.18

34 *Ibid.*, p.170

35 Crowley, *Confessions*, p.134

36 Symonds, p.13

37 E.g. As evident in the creation myth of Genesis

affiliation to deity (God or Satan? Or neither?) seems to parallel the ambiguity of his moral principles, which were the starting point for this psychological exploration.



*Illustration 1: A Hermetic depiction of the occult principle of complementary opposites. After experiencing this ambiguity personally, Crowley was led to ask; which is God and which is Satan?*

### **Crowley's Re-formative Years**

Crowley was pleased when Queen Victoria died in 1901; along with her, an “age of suffocation” had ended.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, a new era was opening up for him to explore his potentialities. Not uncommon for a wealthy Englishman during colonial times, Crowley traveled a lot, often to set climbing records – including being the first to attempt K2 in the Himalayas – and to learn from various teachers.

At the end of the Victorian age, popular 'spiritual' novelties graduated from the passive mediumship of spiritualism to the direct control of consciousness of occultism.<sup>39</sup> Crowley was exposed to this stream during college, and sought to enter an occult order and learn all about magic. He was introduced to a secret Magic Society by a chance invitation, having been overheard boasting of his occult knowledge in a hotel parlor. After two years of searching, this invitation introduced into one of the most prominent occult societies of the era: the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded in 1887. Alternately described as a club to 'pass time and meet friends' or as an elite college for the instruction of ancient occult wisdom and magic, the Golden Dawn brought together a slew of occult sciences and philosophies from all across world history. Its hierarchical structure was similar to Rosicrucian and Freemasonic lodges, and it obliged its members to secrecy, friendship, and zealous

<sup>38</sup> Symonds, p.36

<sup>39</sup> Owen, p.69

study. These members included all manner of artists and cultural elites, and, notably, full equality between the sexes and classes.

Inspired by large movements such as Blavatsky's Theosophy, which considered science and religion to be one – and therewith provided rationalizing accounts of the universe and the place of the Self within it – members of magical orders were drawn to the use of magic as an inner or spiritual science of powerful cognitive tools.<sup>40</sup> Allan Bennett, Crowley's Holy Guru in the Golden Dawn, and the first to seriously study Buddhism in the West,<sup>41</sup> introduced him to psychotropic substances such as hashish and mescaline. Presumably in reference to these experiences, Crowley found that “There exists a drug whose use will open the gates of the World behind the Veil of Matter.”<sup>42</sup>

The magic of the Golden Dawn was based on Abra-Melin, a system of practical guidance to impose one's will on nature,<sup>43</sup> as well as Rosicrucian and Hermetic esotericism and Judeo-Christian mysticism. Similar to the Eastern magic called yoga, it involved contemplation, prayer and abstinence. In the Hermetic tradition, 'pure reason' was thought to be unattainable, as the human perceiving apparatus skews all observations with its own prejudices. The general attitude of Hermeticists, yogis, and scientists therefore converged in the aim of reaching an 'objective' level in which such prejudices, as well as emotional compulsions, wouldn't twist the facts. Having attained objective perception, occultists believed they could use magic to control both the angels and the demons which dwell inside the mind.

This it seems was the goal of mystical experience: an 'objective' and intuitive insight into the reality behind the subjective deceptions of the mind and senses. However, the powers involved – demons and angels in Golden Dawn terminology – made it a potentially dangerous endeavor to the Self and one's environment. Membership as a result was highly selective. In the age of mystical revival, these 'scientific' occult orders were meeting places and producers of the avant garde of British culture. They revamped the eclectic language used by Renaissance Adepts for the modern scientific age, providing a shared frame of social and intellectual reference that had been missing until then.<sup>44</sup>

Alex Owen, tracing the history of British occultism in the late Victorian era, notes that societies such as the Golden Dawn were exclusive and elitist responses to spiritualism. They were “distinctly bourgeois”, but distinguished themselves from spiritualism (which relied on natural talents for mediumship and theatricality) through the intense study of occult knowledge, including instruction in the symbolism of alchemy, Cabala, divination, astrology, invocation, and direct experience of mystical reality. Cabala for instance taught that the cosmos is governed by symbolic correspondences between many planes of being; the connections between them transcend logic, and could only be learned through repetition and direct experience.

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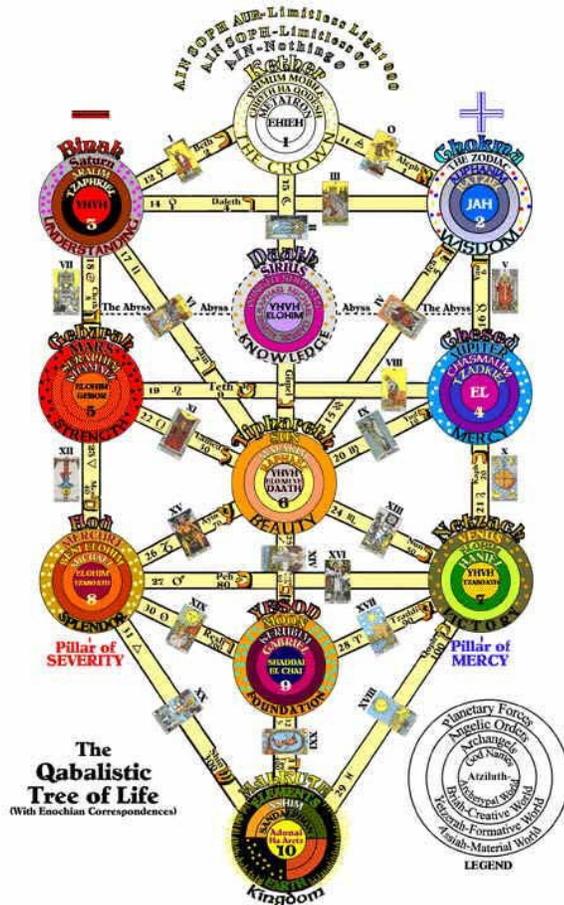
40 Owen, p.34

41 *Ibid.*, p.32

42 Symonds, p.28

43 *Ibid.*, p.26

44 Owen, p.5



*Illustration 2: A detailed version of The Tree of Life, a Cabalistic map of consciousness*

Crowley raced through the levels of the Golden Dawn. He eventually purchased a mansion at Loch Ness to perform a crucial, highly advanced six-month magical ceremony. However, he was called upon by MacGregor Mathers, his Magical Master and head of the Golden Dawn, to visit him in Paris in the midst of his ritual. Considering the fact that ritual magic transforms one's consciousness and exposes the psyche to 'demons' and 'angels,' at least in a metaphorical sense, Crowley's incomplete ceremony may well have adversely affected his mind – at least in the eyes of other magicians. In the meantime, Mathers's Golden Dawn was embroiled in a power struggle, and Crowley, possibly deranged, acted as an emissary between the warring parties. His unorthodox behavior played a significant part in the eventual dissolution of the order.

Crowley now envisioned himself as “no less than the Prophet of a New Aeon,” sent to supplant Christianity with the ideal of a “guiltless, liberated humanity that had, at last, chosen to become the gods it had merely worshiped in the past.”<sup>45</sup> Having left the Golden Dawn, he found an apprentice and sought to initiate his first Magical Adept. Crowley more or less tortured the pupil, poet Victor Neuville,

at his Loch Ness estate, attempting to initiate him in a matter of weeks instead of the usual months or years. The next step included a trip to the Moroccan desert for a stint in advanced Enochian magic. The geographic isolation, psychedelics, and Crowley's never ending quest for consciousness alteration led him to a potentially dangerous occult (or psychological) event; he *crossed the Abyss to face and destroy Choronzon*. The Abyss, the gulf between individual and cosmic (or God) consciousness, and Choronzon, the illusory sense of selfhood – or ego – were overcome in a homosexual act on a mountaintop at the peak of the ceremony (thereby cementing Crowley's later obsession with sex magic).

Crowley was using psychoanalytic concepts by this time and acknowledging the confirmation of certain occult insights in Freudian theory. According to him, Freud was merely restating what magicians had known for centuries.<sup>46</sup> The Abyss he identified with Reason, which seemed to be the crown of the mind; the separation it upholds between aspects of the psyche (conscious and unconscious) is akin to the repressive rules of society. Choronzon, the guardian of the Abyss, was a manifestation of the repressed psyche; the magical Adept, having overcome the grip of the ego, had understood the full implications of his or her subjectivity.

However, Crowley, unlike Freud or the majority of his fellow magicians, did not seem to wish to subdue his instincts, or Choronzon. After his desert experience, Crowley seemed to let himself be dominated by his unconscious.<sup>47</sup> He let his identity shift along with his impulses, masquerading as all manner of personalities during his travels. The cost of crossing the Abyss had been the “excruciating death of his individual self,” opening the path to becoming, on a whim, anyone he wanted to be.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, according to Owen, although Crowley may have been extreme in his “self-conscious engagement with identity,” this is exactly what we now understand as a modern sense of Self.<sup>49</sup>

Lon Milo DuQuette, a scholar of occultism and a practicing magician, upholds the psychological, if not rationalistic interpretation of Crowley's magic. Every reader who is familiar with enough of Crowley's works, he writes, may learn that “Goetic demons are 'portions of the human brain,' and that the 'Hell' into which the magician plunges in order to conquer and command those 'demons' is our own subconscious mind, and that the curses and restraints the magician uses in particular forms of black magic are merely techniques to isolate, focus, and direct our own natural mental abilities.”<sup>50</sup> The language and metaphors that Crowley espoused, while often drawn from – to him – obsolete religions, fit into a scientific framework of introspective psychology to explore and map the psyche. Sutin agrees: the training of the human psyche – more specifically, of the will and imagination – places Crowley “squarely within the tradition” of psychologization.<sup>51</sup>

As is the case with much of Crowley's writings, his Moroccan desert experience was described in multiple jargons. Alternating between poetry, myth, and rational prose, he wrote that “every particle of his 'personality' was consumed;” of “the annihilation of the Self in Pan;”<sup>\*</sup> that he “penetrated beneath the shadow-show to the secret sanctuary of the soul;” and that “at last the Ego [was] found alone, unmasked, conscious of itself and of no other thing.”<sup>52</sup> Crowley seems to have purposely used multiple modes of expression to accommodate those familiar with each particular terminology, in effect making

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46 Owen, p.209

47 *Ibid.*, p.211

48 Sutin, p.202

49 Owen, p.219

50 DuQuette, p.3

51 Sutin, p.7

\* Pan, the mythical symbol of fertility and pleasure as personified by his Magical Adept

52 Owen, p.205

the language of magic an egalitarian meeting point for mystical and rational-scientific ideas.

### Crowley's Creative Contributions

Crowley was not impressed with the majority of Golden Dawn members, and dreamed of beginning his own order. However, without direct contact with the Secret Chiefs – 'hidden masters' in the spirit realm – he believed he could not do so. In 1904, he was providentially contacted by the Chiefs while visiting Cairo with his first wife, Rose; she spontaneously dictated a prophetic message from his Holy Guardian Angel, called Aiwass, an avatar of Horus. This voice of Horus, speaking through his wife, spelled out what became the *Liber al Vel Legis*, or *The Book of the Law*. It was to become a central work in his personal philosophy. Looking back on it he said simply: it is “civilization.”<sup>53</sup>

*The Book of the Law* was an anti-Christian, amoral text professing the seemingly sacrilegious and anarchistic commandments that “There is no law beyond Do What Thou Wilt,” that “Every man and woman is a star,” and that the only sin is restriction. Do What Thou Wilt referred not to fun in a superficial sense, but to being “in tune with the immanent meaning of life.”<sup>54</sup> Often misinterpreted to mean 'do what you like,' the law called for a person to know their True Will; “Quite admirable,” as Symonds writes, but difficult to establish in practice. Where previous commandments, such as those of Moses, held God's children to a common ethic, the Book of the Law was a charter for the freedom to discover a personal ethic in life; a charter for spiritual autarchy.

As a 'star,' each human being is “intrinsically an independent individual,” whose course is off-center when the True Will has not been found.<sup>55</sup> Crowley believed that anything inhibiting the True Will is bad; that those following their True Will can do no harm, except maybe to themselves; and that those who do not know their True Will are slaves. The Magic Formula for the New Aeon therefore was *Thelema* – Greek for Will. The True, or Magickal Will which Crowley preached yoked the conscious and unconscious will together, so that magicians could break free from the social and personal repressions that programmed the average mind, and operate through their own intent.

Crowley's 'religion,' in its basic tenets, was a philosophy of personal fulfillment. He would later find that sex-magic, in its most unrestrictive form, would help discover and express the True Will; thus building a reputation for debauchery, sexual extremes and diabolism, Crowley was something of a shock-artist. His object, he wrote, was “not merely to disgust but to root out ruthlessly the sense of sin” that hundreds of years of Christianity had instilled.<sup>56</sup> Sex became a sacred weapon against Christian oppression at the same time that Freud found it to be a determining factor of civilization.

Obscured by this outwardly shocking - or appealing - image, Crowley also employed a modern empirical approach to accompany his magical liberties: he advocated total skepticism about all results obtained, the keeping of careful objective records of each 'experiment,' and detached philosophical analysis after each stage of increased awareness of the True Will. In the aftermath of WWI, the excesses of peace provided a perfect environment for Crowley to exploit. With movements such as psychoanalysis, Bolshevism, and Dadaism popularizing scientific and anti-bourgeois sentiments, Crowley's magical abbey in Italy attracted many like-minded visitors and disciples.

Alex Owen, speaking about occultists in general, claims they are searching for consolation and meaning in life much as any traditional spiritual seeker does.<sup>57</sup> Whether this applies to Crowley or not,

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53 Symonds, p..255

54 *Ibid.*, p.62

55 Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, p.13

56 Symonds, p.66

57 Owen, p.27

we find that he made a key realization: namely, that by systematically applying science to occult magic, he could create new meaning instead of having to search for ancient consolations. Whereas Madame Blavatsky had looked for veiled cores of mystical truth in traditional religions, Crowley made his own truth.

Keeping this propensity for fictionalizing in mind, all the anecdotes making up Crowley's legend may be taken with a grain of salt. His ambiguity and cross-cultural terminology seems to have been a purposeful gimmick for shocking some and illuminating others – it was both *necessary*, in trying to describe that which cannot be described, and *useful*, in forcing listeners to actively interpret the truth for themselves. The “thin veil of sensational titillation” in his writing and persona assured Crowley that only the capable few would understand and appreciate his work, and that it would continue to be of interest to both admirers and enemies.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, by purposefully presenting himself as untrustworthy, those who listened were conditioned to develop skepticism, not only about their Magical Master's words, but those of anyone else offering objective 'truth.' Crowley's biographer Symonds considers the coexistence of humor, mysticism and coldly skeptical science an unresolved conflict in his writings;<sup>59</sup> however, it seems to have allowed Crowley not to take himself too seriously either.

Crowley offered his pupils both scientific and mystical teachings; on the one hand he would say he was a prophet, cast entirely into the hands of the gods, and on the other he would make observations of the effects of rituals and drugs on himself with minute detail. This ambiguity was carried to extremes in his 'therapeutic' techniques; for example, whilst appropriating Freudian theories, he allowed his children to witness sex magic unrestrictedly so as to prevent 'childhood repressions.'

However, one of his lieutenants was convinced that Crowley's scientific writings pointed to discoveries of a new instrument of knowledge, and a new method of research for mankind.<sup>60</sup> This instrument, Thelema (personal Will), provided people with an alternative to the mass mentalities of Capitalism and Bolshevism. Crowley struggled all his life to communicate this idea: “My former work has been misunderstood, and its scope limited, by my use of technical terms. It has attracted only too many dilettanti and eccentrics, weaklings seeking in 'Magic' an escape from reality. I myself was first consciously drawn to the subject in this way. And it has repelled only too many scientific and practical minds, such as I most designed to influence.”<sup>61</sup>

Finding the True Will, by any experimental means necessary, seems to reflect the modern search for individuation. As Crowley said, “Reject me, and you will become indistinguishable from all these idiots around us.”<sup>62</sup> While others were looking for truth in older manifestations of Christianity, in mysticism and Hermeticism, or in Eastern philosophies and yogas, Crowley denounced them all as excess luggage: “to hell with Christianity, Rationalism, Buddhism, all these lumber of the centuries.” The relevant message for the *fin de siecle* was Magick, the occult science uniquely tailored to each individual.<sup>63</sup>

In 1908 Crowley started publishing the journal *The Equinox: The Review of Scientific Illuminism*. “It was,” says Symonds,  
 “the first serious attempt to put before the public the facts of Occult Science, so-called, since Blavatsky's

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58 DuQuette, p.5

59 Symonds, p.93

60 *Ibid.*, p.228

61 Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, p.10

62 Symonds, p.67

63 *Ibid.*, p.84

unscholarly hotch-potch of facts and fable, *Isis Unveiled* [1877]. It was the first attempt in history to treat the subject with scholarship and from the standpoint of Science. No previous book of its kind can compare with it for the perfection of its style, and the rigidity of its rule never to make any statement which could not be proven as precisely as the mathematician exacts...It did not command a large public but its influence was enormous.”<sup>64</sup>

In it, and elsewhere, Crowley and his pupils psychologized the spirit world; in other words, they unveiled the occult through scientific study and terminology.

One of Crowley's followers wrote in a British newspaper that Father Perdurabo (Crowley's Magical name, *I Will Endure*) “is the most honest of all the great religious teachers. Others have said: 'Believe me!' He says, 'Don't believe me!' He wants an independent and self-reliant body of students to follow out their own methods of research.”<sup>65</sup> Skepticism may help to prevent mystical experiences from turning into religious dogma; Crowley used it creatively to alternate agnosticism with belief according to personal tastes. Instead of providing answers, Crowley taught a scientific means of asking the right questions. Experimentation to engage the True Will therefore had to be continuous, just as scientific theories should be constantly fine-tuned or replaced. The fear and slander which this approach elicited from the post-Victorian public attest to an age more comfortable still with a common dogma than with doubt.



*Illustration 3: Symbol of the Ordo Templi Orientis*

### **Crowley's Sexual Magic**

Another occultist, the Freemason and founder of the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), Carl Kellner, had searched the East for esoteric knowledge, and came to believe what Freud did around the same time: that sex was the key to man's nature. And this, it seemed, was the time for Western thought to entertain such views, as sexual and gender identities were rapidly changing. Nevertheless, few areas of society allowed upward mobility for women. Magical orders such as the Golden Dawn, because of their

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<sup>64</sup> Symonds, p.101

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114

uncommon progressiveness, attracted modern women and feminists; but the practice and instruction of sex magic – or Tantra, an ancient tradition in the East – was not yet realized in most.

In Germany however, Kellner's *Ordo Templi Orientis* (OTO), founded in 1902, practiced a form of sex magic which they traced back to the Gnostic Catholic Church, the Rosicrucians, the Order of Illuminati, the Order of Malta, and all the way to the Knights Templar. The leader of the order actually visited Crowley in secret; he had discovered that Crowley was unwittingly revealing their highest secrets in some of his books. With proclamations like “All magic is sexual” and “All life is sexual,” and that “The real question is, what is sex symbolic of?”, Crowley was making public what the OTO deemed unfit for common knowledge.<sup>66</sup> Crowley swore secrecy and joined the OTO as its English head, Baphomet, eventually reorganizing it under his own ideas. He continued traveling, organizing Pagan orgies in the US before and during WWI. Sexuality as a means to gnosis became his “guiding reality;”<sup>67</sup> however, his stay in America was disappointing. Americans, he said, were all power-hungry and devoured new cults, religions and charlatanisms whole. He was disappointed by the strong grip of dogmatism, and the “practically universal ignorance of the elements of spiritual science” that characterized the US.<sup>68</sup>

Most other occult leaders tended towards celibacy, but Crowley was engaging in all forms of sexuality he could think, all the while keeping meticulous records and analyses of his experiments. Crowley celebrated his bisexuality, actively pursuing a spiritually un-gendered state (as was the goal in higher levels of the Golden Dawn). By this time, “Sex had become for him the means by which he reached God. It was his vehicle of consecration, his daily prayers. He performed the sexual act not just for the emotive relief, or for the making of children, but 'to start a new current,' renew his energy.” It was a sacred, magical deed which offered mystical experience by way of a pleasurable shortcut,<sup>69</sup> and the notoriety it accorded him places Crowley at a (rather extreme) vanguard of sexual liberation. Still, while Crowley, like Kellner and Freud, gave sex the utmost psychological importance, it is difficult to extract his meaning without proper initiation; often times, he purposefully veiled the true meaning of his words.<sup>70</sup>

### **Occultism as the Science of Self-Divinity**

*Fin de siècle* occultism such as that of Crowley has been ignored by many historians, says Owen, because it falls outside of their traditional (read: positivist and secular) notions of the modern.<sup>71</sup> This traditional scope was already apparent in Crowley's day; for example, James Frazer's famously linear model of social evolution in *The Golden Bough*, where magic is the most primitive stage of society before religion and science, expressed the positivist prejudice of science towards magic. But magic, as Owen aims to prove, continued to exist alongside of and connected with science in the modern era.

Aside from the teleological postulations of theorists like Frazer, the *fin de siècle* itself was a time of uncertainty about modernity. Amidst this ambiguity, the occult world was self-consciously attempting to formulate a new rationality – beyond science, and engaged with the creative arts.

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66 DuQuette, p.114

67 Sutin, p.11

68 Symonds, p.145

69 *Ibid.*, p.135

70 DuQuette, p.6

71 Owen, p.6

Occultists certainly considered themselves to be modern;<sup>72</sup> they employed science as a tool for uncovering new wisdom in the 'spiritual' domains, and for maintaining religious experience as opposed to eschewing it. Where ordinary psychology saw non-waking or irrational states of consciousness – dreaming, day-dreaming, trance, etc – as inferior, occultists actively sought them as valuable experiences.<sup>73</sup>

Gnostic and Eastern traditions, such as the ability to conceive of godliness as inherently human and rational, had been reintroduced to the West by 19th century scholars such as Friedrich Max Muller. As in Buddhism, the great goal of Crowley's magical enterprise was successful instruction in the reconciliation of the human and the divine: the individual could accomplish this task by learning metaphorical and psychological correspondences – symbolic systems such as Cabala and the Tarot – between the physical and metaphysical.

The desire for personal perfection, or the transcendence of humanity, should not strike us as necessarily pre-modern: it was similarly formulated by Nietzsche and Freud.<sup>74</sup> In the language of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, this endeavor was called the 'Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel,' or encountering the permanent and divine level of the Self. It was the “classic and universal personal religious experience,”<sup>75</sup> and not an experience of faith, which is a projection of power outside of the individual. Since the great “secret” of the occult project was the “return to godhead,”<sup>76</sup> or Self-realization, faith in personal spiritual guidance from outside the Self was unwarranted. Instead, achieving Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel was tantamount to receiving such guidance from the “only reliable source in the universe: ourselves.”<sup>77</sup> Specific rituals and techniques were taught – such as meditation, incantation, and self-hypnosis – to induce desired modes of consciousness where the Angel could be contacted. This is what Crowley had first done in Egypt when the *Book of the Law* was 'dictated' to him.

As Crowley writes, the Angel simply refers to the awakening of a 'supernormal' power in ourselves<sup>78</sup> – it is a metaphor for communication with the unconscious mind. Similar metaphors or symbolisms were used by Freud, such as in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, and later by Jung. Occultists readily acknowledged – and lauded – the use of diverse metaphors by the fictionalizing, subjective mind to create occult reality, thereby signaling their “extreme modernity” to Owen.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the cultural appropriation of scientific and mystical terms – as evidenced in the New Age movement – has certainly not abated since the *fin de siècle*.

In Crowley's estimation, the world needed the Law of Thelema. Armed with opium, cocaine, ether, morphine, heroin, hashish, wine, liqueurs and other drugs, as well as yoga, occult and magic books and items, a razor blade, and a magical diary, Crowley conceived of a scientific approach to destroy the ego (the 'false' Self) and unleash the True Will. While the razor was meant for cutting a line in the skin for each use of the word “I,” the journal was used to record and analyze dreams, idle thought, seemingly irrational moods, etc. Psychoanalysis at this time also recognized that the “I” of

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72 Owen, p.9

73 *Ibid.*, p.127

74 *Ibid.*, p.76

75 DuQuette, p.121

76 Crowley, *quoted in* DuQuette, p.195

77 DuQuette, p.122

78 Owen, p.177

79 *Ibid.*, p.184

identity is simply a convenient fiction; and that by analyzing the Self, it could perhaps be dismantled and reformatted.<sup>80</sup> So Crowley was engaging science, or a scientific approach, as self-therapy or self-improvement, using experimental methods to discover, analyze, and control the programming of his mind. This form of magic offered the modern individual “enchantment in the disenchanting [or scientific] language of the secularized self.”<sup>81</sup>

Mastering the Self in all its layers led to individual and therefore social transformations that have remained largely unstudied. Owen's leading contention is that this transformative quality of occultism in modern culture cannot be dismissed, as subjective perception, psychic formation, and the creation of reality itself were spearheaded in part by the occult.<sup>82</sup> Her contention seems to derive support from the fact that Crowley professed that “There is no god but man,”<sup>83</sup> allowing a new ethic of freedom which found expression in his own life and the social revolution of the 1960s.

Crowley claimed to have mastered every mode of his mind, and to have adopted a code of morality more severe than any other in the world – “if only by virtue of its absolute freedom from any code of conduct.”<sup>84</sup> Measuring the reaction of his enemies, he decided his work had more influence on initiated thought than that of any one else in his generation,<sup>85</sup> and he publicly stated himself to be the foremost living psychologist.<sup>86</sup>

Near the end of her work, Alex Owen ties Enlightenment rationalism – a professed tool of modern individuality and true knowledge – and its resistance to self-criticism, to the loss of personal integrity and self-destructiveness so apparent in the modern secular era.<sup>87</sup> In the case of Crowley, it can be wondered whether he ever had integrity to speak of; however, the point stands. Crowley took rationalism into the deepest levels of his psyche, returning as a boundless, fully amoral man. He aimed to show his followers that the repressed drives of the unconscious are rationally observable, and that engaging them brings one closer to the True Will of the Self – indeed, that one could be brought to the point of “spiritual transformation” through Magick.<sup>88</sup> The ego, occultists like Crowley believed, is not entirely rational, and so they strove to make the 'irrational' an intrinsic part of modernity.

### **Crowley's Legacy**

At his peak Crowley was known in the British press as 'The Wickedest Man in the World.' He was slandered in caricatures based on the many rumors often spread by himself. In response, he compared himself to Columbus and Darwin, and lumped his enemies – whether scientists, occultists, believers, or otherwise – into a mob with “an instinctive dread of a man who dares the unknown.”<sup>89</sup>

Crowley's legacy is ambiguous. The OTO remained dormant for a few decades before being revived by rival successors. Among those who were influenced by Crowley's teachings were Anton LaVey, founder of the Church of Satan; Jack Parsons, American rocket scientist during the early Cold War and co-founder of the NASA research center JPL (Jet Propulsion Laboratory); and through him, Crowley has been linked to L. Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology. Sutin also lists a dozen famous

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80 Owen, p.210

81 *Ibid.*, p.236

82 *Ibid.*, p.15

83 Crowley, *Liber Oz*

84 Symonds, p.170

85 *Ibid.*, p.172

86 *Ibid.*, p.183

87 Owen, op. cit.

88 Sutin, p.14

89 Symonds, p.213

authors who modeled characters on Crowley, and another dozen famous rock artists who proclaimed his influence (e.g. the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Sting, Ozzy Osbourne, The Cure). Today, Sutin believes, Crowley's presence is mostly felt in 'counterculture' circles, and wrongly so; they ignore the fact that he was an aristocrat, which presumably means to say that he wasn't countercultural.<sup>90</sup> Whether the omission is an error or not, as Sutin claims, it is Crowley's writings which continue to resonate, and not his heritage.

While Crowley maintained himself financially, and perhaps psychologically, by increasing his infamy as best as he could, he was quickly forgotten after his death. The OTO languished without clear leadership. However, a second wave of occultism in the 60s heralded his return: as DuQuette writes, Crowley was “dead in obscurity for exactly twenty years...until the Beatles put him on the cover” of the Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. Fans starting researching all the unnamed portraits, more or less a list of people that the Beatles liked, and so Crowley was rediscovered by the cultural movement that he helped create.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion

Magic, in Crowley's hands, was a radical approach to developing the powers of the subjective mind. With direct access to the unconscious, the 'scientifically illuminated' individual could for himself decide what is real and what is not. Unlike the occultism of Underhill, Kingsford and Blavatsky, it was not mysticism for the sake of mysticism: Crowley incorporated mysticism for a measure of control over one's own sense of reality. What more powerful way to do this than to create his own 'religion,' scientific illuminism, or Thelema, with its own commandments?

The modern age, as exemplified by Crowley, used science to question and overcome – or at least move on from several – religious claims to truth. Crowley made it his business to challenge and overcome those of science and society as well. Detachment from 'objective' beliefs made social and cultural dogma largely irrelevant, while continued experimentation allowed Crowley and his followers to make their own meaning in a progressive and innovative way. To ensure individualism, a general agnosticism was encouraged, and all readers were asked to disregard anything Crowley himself had proclaimed unless personally confirmed.<sup>92</sup>

The rewriting of the rules of engagement with the Self is, according to Owen, the “The unexamined problem that lay at the heart of *fin de siècle* occultism.” It seems that she positions Crowley on a level with Freud: they both “exemplify the logic of Enlightenment reason and its dynamic of colonization and control” by seeking to “open up the unconscious to rational self-exploration.”<sup>93</sup> However, whereas Freud created a dogmatic and hierarchical organization of experts, Crowley created an oxymoron: his “Thelemic organization” of magicians was essentially a chaotic “collection of militant individualists all endeavoring to do their own will.”<sup>94</sup> By way of analogy – where Moses' tablets had formed the basis of thousands of years of patronizing religious law, Crowley's *Book of the Law* was a charter for universal freedom. By breaking all the taboos he could find, sexually and otherwise, and denouncing everything that came before him, Crowley was necessarily modern.

Though deeply psychological, Crowley's Magick differentiated itself from contemporary theories such as Freud's by emphasizing the agency of the individual in their own mental makeup.

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90 Sutin, p.3

91 DuQuette, p.xiv

92 DuQuette, p.23

93 Owen, p.249

94 DuQuette, p.214

Crowley managed to be and believe anything he ritually conditioned himself to, including an identity as the Great Beast of the modern age. He did not actually believe that the Devil exists;<sup>95</sup> but using him as a metaphor for his elusive self-identity garnered lasting fame and followers. It is this trait, stressing Will over pathology, that makes Crowley a 'co-founder of the individualist.'

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95 Crowley, *Magick Book 4*, p.277

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